Open-source portal app is promising

REVIEW: BUT JAVASERVER-BASED EXO PLATFORM LIVES UP TO ITS 1.0 MONIKER; LICENSING IS COMPLEX

By Jim Rapoza

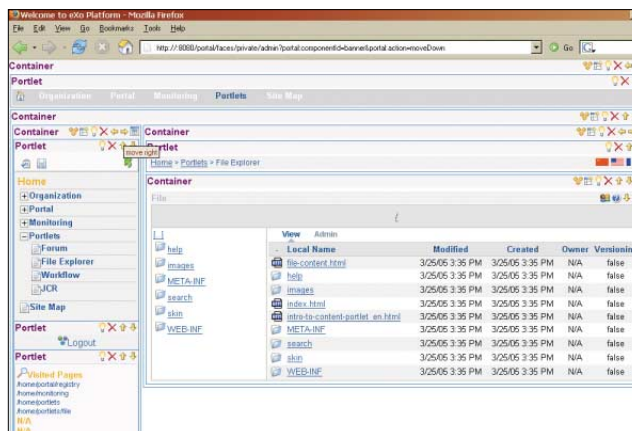**We could easily change the layout and look of our Exo portal pages.**

EXO PLATFORM 1.0 IS THE LATEST ENTRY IN THE INCREASingly crowded and increasingly capable field of enterprise-class open-source portals and publishing systems.

Released in February by The Exo Platform SARL, Exo Platform 1.0 provides extensive (and relatively low-cost) development and customization features for building corporate portals.

eWEEK Labs was impressed in many ways by Exo Platform 1.0, and we think it could be a good fit for many enterprise needs. However, Exo Platform 1.0 doesn't stack up well against more robust open-source options, such as Plone 2.0, because of its current immaturity.

Using the JavaServer-based Exo Platform 1.0, eWEEK Labs was able to quickly build a customized and extensible portal that could meet a variety of business needs. During tests, we were impressed with many of Exo Platform 1.0's features and capabilities. Others, however, had a distinct Version 1.0 feel, with some aspects of the product seeming somewhat incomplete.

Exo Platform 1.0 boasts strong developer-oriented features, including integration with Eclipse and a framework based on JavaServer Faces technology, which is more portlet-friendly than standard JavaServer Pages technology. Exo Platform 1.0 can also integrate with corporate directories, and it has surprisingly extensive workflow capabilities.

The main browser-based interface is attractive and intuitive, especially when it comes to customizing the layout and adding portlets. However, the interface has a tendency to become crowded and complex, depending on the tasks being performed. At times, this left us unsure about how to get out of certain view modes or how to carry out specific tasks.

The licensing issues around Exo Platform 1.0 can be similarly complex. The product is open-source and can be used under the standard GNU GPL (General Public License). However, The Exo Platform SARL also sells standard commercial licenses of the product, with the Enterprise version starting at 2,990 euros (approximately $3,854 U.S.) per CPU. Support costs an extra 20 percent of the total acquisition cost per year. (The Exo Platform SARL is based in Europe, but the organization works with integrators in many countries, including the United States.)

Promising portal app

AS A JAVA APPLICATION, EXO Platform 1.0 can run on pretty much anything, and we quickly had it up and running on a Tomcat server. Once we were logged in to the portal as an administrator, we could carry out a wide range of management functions and had access to some very good monitoring and tracking features.

Exo Platform also has some

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Exo Platform 1.0

Based on open and proven server technologies, Exo Platform 1.0 is a promising entry in the growing field of powerful open-source portals and publishing systems. Exo Platform has strong developer features and good standards support, but it shows its 1.0 immaturity with some confusing or even missing interface features. For more information, go to www.exoplatform.com/portal/faces/public/exo/home/company.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS	
CONTENT AUTHORING	FAIR
ROLES & WORKFLOW	GOOD
DEVELOPER OPTIONS	GOOD
PLATFORM SUPPORT	EXCELLENT

COST ANALYSIS: Exo Platform 1.0 is offered freely under the standard GPL, but The Exo Platform SARL sells a $3,854 commercial license for the product, mainly for those worried about the GPL. This price is very low when compared with that of commercial offerings, but you'd spend a lot less on something like Plone or PHPNuke, even when adding in the cost of third-party support.

EVALUATION SHORTLIST

■ **Magnolia** An open-source, Java-based content management system that focuses on usability, with one of the most intuitive user interfaces we've seen (www.magnolia.info) ■ **PaperThin CommonSpot** A midtier product with good UIs (www.paperthin.com) ■ **Plone** An eWEEK Labs Analyst's Choice winner, this open-source product is one of the best solutions—period—for company portals and intranets (www.plone.org)

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good tools for creating and managing users and groups. More important, it can integrate with company directories through an OpenLDAP implementation (although this requires good LDAP familiarity).

During tests, eWEEK Labs was especially impressed with Exo Platform 1.0's workflow capabilities, which almost resemble BPM (business process management) in their ability to create and manage complex human work processes. Exo Platform 1.0 doesn't provide the type of visual process tool that BPM products typically have, but we could create processes using XML and other standard formats to handle the workflow of tasks as varied as vacation requests and purchase orders.

Exo Platform 1.0 has many of the portlets that one would expect in this type of product, including forums, RSS features and integrated Wiki support. Like many of its commercial rivals, Exo Platform 1.0 uses a community-based approach to organizing and managing the portal and its users, making it possible to arrange the portal in a way that best fits a company's structure and work style.

The rich interface proved attractive at first, but after we started doing serious work, we often had to backtrack or were unsure of where to make
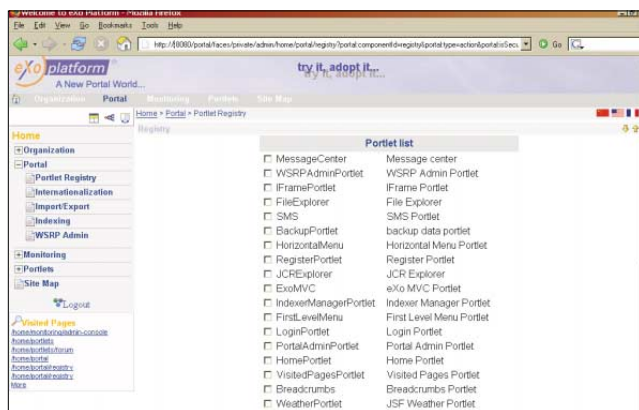
certain changes. Also, while every page showed a Help button, clicking on the buttons never delivered any integrated help information.

On the plus side, some very good documentation is provided in a Wiki at the Exo home page (www.exoplatform.com/portal/faces/public/exo). Between this documentation and the forums on the site, we were able to find answers to most of our problems.

We found Exo Platform 1.0's standards support to be universally good: In addition to its support for Java-Server Faces, Exo Platform 1.0 supports Web Services for Remote Portals and Java Content Repository specifications. And, like most open-source server products, Exo Platform 1.0 interfaces worked in every browser with which we tested, including the latest versions of Firefox, Internet Explorer, Mozilla and Safari.

Exo Platform 1.0's international features are among some of the best we've seen, making it very simple to move among languages in the portal (including Chinese, English and French, by default). We also liked the mode that made it simple to control the look and feel of our portal. *e*

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Exo Platform 1.0 includes a good number of useful prebuilt portlets.

Portals fostering open-source success

I F YOU GO TO THE OPEN-SOURCE DEVELOPMENT SITE SOURCE-forge.net and search on the term "portal," you'll get hundreds of hits. In fact, you could reasonably argue that, when it comes to open-source enterprise applications, portals have been the biggest success story.

In addition to being highly effective and capable on their own, open-source portals have served to demonstrate the effectiveness of other open-source technologies, especially the MySQL database and the PHP scripting language. This is clearly illustrated in probably the most popular open-source portal application, PHP-Nuke (www.phpnuke.org), which is easily customized and includes pretty much any feature you would want from a portal, including content and document management, forums, chat, and blogging. PHP-Nuke has spawned additional open-source portals, including PostNuke (www.postnuke.com).

Portals of comparable quality based on other platforms are fewer and farther between, but you won't have to look too hard.

Many very good open-source portals are based on Java-Server technology, including Liferay LLC's Liferay Portal (www.liferay.com), Magnolia (www.magnolia.info) and The Exo Platform SARL's Exo Platform 1.0 (see review, Page 47). Perhaps surprisingly, there are also many good open-source portals based on Microsoft Corp.'s .Net platform. One excellent example is DotNetNuke (www.dotnetnuke.com). Even the venerable Perl language has portal applications, such as the code that runs the popular Slashdot site.

And we would be remiss if we didn't mention one of the best open-source portal options available, a product that has garnered eWEEK Labs Analyst's Choice recognition: Plone (www.plone.org), which is based on the Python language and Zope Corp.'s Zope application server.

The list could go on and on, with many excellent portal applications working on almost any platform and on any language. And many of these aren't simply proof-of-concept but can be found running many business sites and on large company intranets. A quick search through the user lists of many open-source portal applications reveals government agencies, nonprofit organizations and very large businesses using open-source portals for core activities and sites.

In addition, while some of these open-source portals are on the small, individual developer side of the open-source movement, many have a company backing the application and have multiple professional consultants and integrators trained on deploying and supporting the open-source portal platform.

Companies no longer have to fear going it alone with an open-source application; instead, they can get the type of support and reliability they have come to expect from commercial vendors. —*Jim Rapoza*